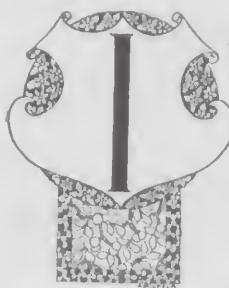


AN IDYL OF CENTRAL PARK

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

ILLUSTRATED BY IRVING R. WILES



T WAS nearly five o'clock on an afternoon early in May when Dr. Richard Demarest bicycled up Fifth Avenue and into Central Park. He looked at his watch to make sure of the hour, and then he dismounted on the western side of the broad drive, whence he could see everybody who might seek to enter the Park long before they were likely to discover him. He had reason to believe that Miss Minnie Contoit, who had refused to marry him only a fortnight before, and whom he had not seen since, was going to take a little turn on her wheel in the Park that afternoon.

As it had happened, he had gone into the club to lunch that morning, and he had met her only brother, with whom he had always carefully maintained the most pleasant relations. By ingeniously pumping Ralph Contoit he had ascertained that the girl he loved was going out at five with her father and her grandfather; and the brother had been even franker.

"I say," he had declared, "I don't know what has come over Minnie this last ten days; she's been as cross as two sticks, and generally she's pretty even-tempered for a girl, you know. But she's been so touchy lately; she nearly took my head off this morning! I guess you had better have Dr. Cheever come around and prescribe for her. Cocaine for a bad temper is what she needs now, I can tell you!"

Although he was a rejected lover he was not melancholy. In the springtime youth feels the joy of living, and Richard Demarest took delight in the beauty of the day. The foliage was everywhere fresh and vigorous after the persistent rains of April, and a scent of young blossoms came to him from a clump of bushes behind the path. A group of half a dozen girls flashed past him on their wheels, laughing lightly as they sped along home, each of them with a bunch of fragrant lilacs lashed to her handle-bar.

He followed them with his eye till they turned out of the Park; and then at the entrance he saw the girl he was waiting for riding her bicycle carefully across the car-tracks in Fifty-ninth Street. Her father and grandfather were with her, one on each side.

Dr. Demarest sprang on his wheel and sped on ahead. When he came to the foot of the Mall he swerved to the westward. Then he turned and retraced his path, reaching the branching of the ways just as General Contoit, with his son and his granddaughter, arrived there.

The General was nearly seventy, but he sat his wheel with a military stiffness, holding himself far more carefully than his son, the Professor. Between them came Miss Minnie Contoit, a slim slip of a girl, in a light brown cloth suit, with her pale blond hair coiled tightly under a brown alpine hat. They had just come up a hill and the General's face was ruddy, but the girl's was as colorless as ever. Demarest had often wondered why it was that no exercise ever brought a flush to her ivory cheeks.

He watched her now as her grandfather caught sight of him, and cried out, "Hello, Doctor! Out for a spin?"

He saw her look up, and then she glanced away swiftly, as though to choose her course of conduct before she acknowledged his greeting.

"Good-afternoon, General; how well you are looking this spring!" said Demarest. "Good-afternoon, Pro-

fessor. And you, too, Miss Contoit. Going round the Park, are you? May I join you?" He looked at her as he asked the question.

It was her grandfather who answered. "Come along, come along! We shall be delighted to have you!"

She said nothing. They were all four going up on the east side of the Mall, and they had already left behind them the bronze mass-meeting of misshapen celebrities which disfigures that broad plateau. A Park omnibus was loitering in front of them, and they could not pass it four abreast.

"Come on, papa," cried the girl; "let's leave grandpa and Dr. Demarest to take care of each other! We had better go ahead and show them the way!"

It struck Dr. Demarest that she was glad to get away from him, as though her sudden flight was an instinctive shrinking from his wooing. He smiled and held this for a good sign. He was in no hurry to have his talk out with her, and he did not mean to begin it until a proper opportunity presented itself. He was glad to have her in front of him, where he could follow her movements and get delight out of the sunshine through the branches as it fell molten on her fine, light hair. It pleased him to watch her firm strokes as they came to a hill, and to see that she rode with no waste of energy.

The General had done his duty in the long years of the war, and he liked to talk about what he had seen. Dr. Demarest was a good listener, and perhaps this was one reason why the old soldier was always glad of his company. The young doctor was considerate, also, and he never increased his pace beyond the gait most comfortable for his elder companion; and as they drew near to the Metropolitan Museum he guided the General away to the Fifth-Avenue entrance and thence back to the main road, by which excursion they avoided the long and steep hill, at the top of which stands Cleopatra's Needle. And as they

had ridden on the level rather rapidly they almost caught up with the General's son and granddaughter.

The two couples were close to each other as they went around the reservoir, along the shaded road on the edge of the Park, with the sidewalk of Fifth Avenue down below. Everywhere the grass was fresh and fragrant; and everywhere the squirrels were frequent and impudent, cutting across the road almost under the wheels, or sitting up on the narrow sward in impudent expectation of the nuts gently thrown to them from the carriages.

When they came to McGown's Pass he saw the Professor suddenly dismount, and he thought that Minnie was going on alone and that her father had to call her back.

"Shall we rest here for a while, father?" asked the Professor, as the General and the Doctor dismounted.

"Just as you say," the old soldier answered; "just as you say. I'm not at all fatigued, not at all. But don't let us old fogies keep you young folks from your exercise. Minnie, you and the Doctor can ride on—"

"But, grandpa—" she began, in protest.

"I'll stay here a minute or two with your father," the General continued. "The Doctor is very kind to let me talk to him, but I'm sure he'd rather talk to you, my dear; so you two can run along together."

"I shall be delighted to accompany Miss Contoit if she cares to have a little spin," said Dr. Demarest, turning to her.

"Oh, well," she answered a little ungraciously; then she smiled swiftly, and added, "I always do what grandpa wants. Don't you think I'm a very good little girl?" And with that she started forward, springing lightly to her seat after her bicycle was in motion.

Demarest was jumping on his wheel to follow, when her father called out, "Don't let her ride uphill too fast, Doctor!"

"Isn't papa absurd?" she asked, laughing; "and

grandpa, too? They are always wanting me to take care of myself, just as if I didn't!"

They overtook and passed a woman weighing two hundred pounds and full forty years of age, who was toiling along on a bicycle, dressed in a white skirt, a



"'I'm sure he'd rather talk to you, my dear'"

pink shirt-waist and a straw sailor-hat. The Doctor turned and bowed to this strange apparition, but the plump lady was too fully occupied in her arduous task to be able to do more than gasp out, "Good—after—noon—Doctor—"

When they had gone one hundred yards ahead the Doctor's companion expressed her surprise. "You do know the funniest people!" she cried. "Who on earth was that?"

"That?" he echoed. "Oh, that's a patient of Dr. Cheever's. He advised her to get a bicycle if she wanted to be thinner—"

"And he told me to get one if I wanted to be a little fatter!" the girl interrupted. "Isn't that inconsistent?"

"I don't think so," the young man answered, glad that the conversation had taken this impersonal turn, and yet wondering how he could twist it to the point where he wanted it. "Outdoor exercise helps people to health, you see, and if they are unhealthily fat it tends to thin them down, and if they are very thin it helps them to put on flesh."

"I'd bike fourteen hours a day if I was a porpoise like that," said the girl, glancing back at the plump struggler behind them.

Just then a horn tooted and a coach came around the next turn. There were on it three or four girls in gay spring costumes, and two of them bowed to Dr. Demarest.

Behind the four-in-hand followed a stylish victoria, in which sat a handsome young woman alone. She was in black. Her somber face lighted with a smile as she acknowledged the young doctor's bow.

"I've seen her somewhere," said the girl by his side. "Who is she?"

"That's Mrs. Cyrus Poole," he answered; "the widow of the Wall Street operator, who died two years ago."

"What lots of people you know," she commented.

"How is a young doctor to get on unless he knows lots of people?" was his answer.

She said nothing for a minute or two, as they threaded their way through a tangle of vehicles stretching along the northernmost drive of the Park.

Then she asked, "Why is it that most of the women we have passed this afternoon sitting back in their carriages look bored to death?"

"I suppose it's because they've got all they want," the Doctor responded. "They have nothing left to live for; they have had everything. That's what makes them so useful to our profession. They send for us because they are bored, and they want sympathy. I suppose everybody likes to talk about himself, especially when he's out of sorts; now, you see, the family doctor can always be sent for, and it's his business to listen to your account of your symptoms. That's what he's paid for."

"I don't think that's a nice way of earning a living, do you?" returned the girl.

"Oh, I don't know," he answered. "Why not? It's our duty to relieve suffering, and these women are just suffering for a chance to describe all their imaginary ailments."

"Women?" she cried, indignantly. "Are all these old fools women?"

"There must be men sometimes, I suppose," he replied; "but most of a family physician's work is with the women, of course."

Then it seemed to him that he saw before him the opportunity he had been awaiting. They were now climbing the hill at the northwestern corner of the Park. He slowed up so that she should not be tempted to overexert herself. He even went so far as to lag a little behind. When they began to go down again gently he came alongside.

"By the way," he began, "speaking of what a family physician has to do reminds me that I want to ask your advice."

"My advice?" she echoed, with the light little laugh that thrilled through him always. "Why, I don't know anything about medicine."

"It isn't a professional consultation I want," he answered, laughing himself, "it's friendly counsel. Don't you remember that when you told me you couldn't love me you went on and said you hoped we should always be good friends?"

"Yes," she responded, calmly, "I remember that. And I do hope that if I can really show my friendliness in any way you will let me."

"That's what I am coming to," he returned. "You know, I've been helping Dr. Cheever as a sort of third man while Dr. Aspinwall has been ill? Well, Dr. Aspinwall isn't getting any better, and he's got to quit for a year, anyhow. So Dr. Cheever is going to take me with him—"

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she broke in, heartily. "That's splendid for you, isn't it?"

"It will be splendid for me if I can keep the place and do the work to his satisfaction," he answered.

"Oh, I guess Dr. Cheever knows what he is about," retorted the girl, gaily. "He knows how clever you are."

"Thank you," the young man returned. "I felt sure you would be pleased, because you have always been so kind to me."

He hesitated for a moment, and then continued. "I feel as if I owe you an apology—"

"What for?" she asked, in surprise.

"For the way I behaved last time we—we had a talk," he answered.

"Oh, then," she commented; and it seemed to him that she had almost made an effort to retain the non-committal expression she was affecting.

"You may remember," he went on, "that I asked you to marry me, and that you refused, and that you told me you didn't love me at all, but you did like me—"

"What's the use of going over all that again?" she asked.

"I must make myself right with you, Miss Minnie," he urged. "You said we could be friends, and I was all broke up then, and I didn't know just what I was saying, and I told you friendship wasn't any good to me, and if I couldn't have you there wasn't anything else I wanted. I must have been very rude, indeed, and it has worried me ever since."

"I'll forgive you, if that's what you mean," she responded. "I hadn't really thought about it twice. It isn't of any consequence."

"It is to me," he returned. "Now, I've changed my mind, and if you will offer the friendship again I'll accept it gladly."

"Why, Dr. Demarest!" she said, smiling, but with a flash in her gray eyes, "of course we can be good friends, just as we have always been. And now you needn't talk any more about this foolish misunderstanding."

So saying she started ahead. They had been climbing a hill, and now they had on their left a broad meadow, gay with groups of tennis-players. At an opening on the right a mounted policeman sat his horse as immovable as an equestrian statue. Just before them were two gentlemen with impatient trotters trying to get a clear space; and there was also a double file of young men and girls from some riding-school, under the charge of a robust German riding-master.

It was not for two or three minutes that Dr. Demarest was able to resume his position by the side of Miss Contoit.

"I had to set myself right," he began, abruptly, "because if we really are friends I want your help."

"I shall be very glad, I'm sure," she replied. "I've told you so already."

"But what I want is something very serious," he continued.

"What is it?" she asked, drawing away a little.

"It's advice," he explained.

She gave a light laugh of relief. "Oh, advice," she repeated; "anybody can give you advice."

"Not the advice I want," he responded, gravely. "It's a very solemn thing for me, I can assure you."

"And what is this very solemn thing?" she inquired, airily.

"It's marriage," he answered. "I've got to get married, and—and—"

"Don't let's go back to that again," she said, with frank impatience. "I thought we had settled that once for all."

"Oh, I didn't mean you," he returned, apologetically.

"You didn't mean me?" she repeated, in amazement. "Why, I thought—well, it's no matter what I thought, of course."

"I'm afraid I'm getting things all mixed up," he said, calmly. "Of course, you are the only woman I love, and the only woman I ever shall love. I told you that the last time we met, and you told me that you didn't love me—so that settled it."

"Well?" she interrogated.

"Well, if I can't have what I want," he explained, "I'd better get what I need."

"I confess I do not know what you are talking about," she declared.

"It's simple enough," he returned. "I'm a doctor, and I'm young—I'm only thirty—and I haven't a bald spot yet, so people think I'm even younger than I am, and they haven't confidence in me. So I've got to get married."

The girl laughed out merrily. "Can't you get a bald spot any other way?" she asked.

"If I have a wife I don't need a bald spot," he responded. "A wife is a warrant of respectability. Every doctor will tell you that's the way patients feel. I'm tired of going to see some old woman for Dr.

Cheever, and sending up my card and overhearing her say, 'I won't see him! I don't want Dr. Demarest! I sent for Dr. Cheever, and it's Dr. Cheever I want to see!' That has happened to me, and not only once or twice, either."

"How could any woman be so unladylike?" the girl asked, indignantly. "She must have been a vulgar old thing!"

"There's more than one of her in New York," the young doctor asserted, "and that's one reason why I've got to get married. And between you and me, I think that my chance of staying with Dr. Cheever would be better if I had a wife. Of course, he doesn't say so, but I can't help knowing what he thinks."

The girl made no comment on this. They were on the crest of a hill, and they overlooked the broad expanse of the reservoir. The almost level rays of the sinking sun thrust themselves through the leafy branches and made a rosy halo about her fair head.

"So that's why I've come to you for advice," he began again.

"But I don't see what good my advice will be to you," she returned. "You don't expect me to pick out a wife for you, do you?"

"Well, that's about it!" he admitted.

"The idea!" she retorted. "Why, it's perfectly absurd!"

"So long as I cannot get the girl I love marriage ceases to be a matter of sentiment with me," he went on, stolidly. "I come to you as a friend who knows girls—knows them in a way no man can ever know them. I want your help in selecting a woman who will make a good wife for a doctor."

"How do you know she will have you?" she thrust at him.

"Of course, I don't know," he admitted. "I can't know till I try, can I? And if at first I don't succeed I must try, try again. If the one you pick out refuses me I'll have to get you to pick out another."

"So it's a mere marriage of convenience you are after?" the girl asked. "That's all very well for you, no doubt; but how about the woman who marries you? I don't think it's a very nice lookout for her, do you? That's just the way with you men always! You never think about the woman's feelings!"

"I'll do my duty to her," he answered.

"Your duty!" sniffed the girl, indignantly.

"I'll be so attentive to her that she will never guess my heart is given to another," he went on.

"Don't be too sure of that," she returned. "Women have very sharp eyes—sharper than you men think—especially about a thing like that!"

"I am not going to borrow trouble," the Doctor declared, suavely. "I shall always be as nice to her as I can, and if it is in my power to make her happy, then she will be happy. But we needn't anticipate. What I want you to do now is to help me to find the right woman. It will be my business to take care of her afterward."

"Oh, very well," said the girl, rather sharply. "Have you anybody in particular in view?"

"I haven't really fixed on anybody yet," he explained. "I wanted your advice first, for I'm going to rely on that. I feel sure you won't let me make a mistake about a matter so important to me!"

"Then don't let's waste any time!" she cried, peremptorily.

"Really," he declared, "it's astonishing how a little bit of a thing like you can be so bossy." She looked at him fiercely, so he made haste to add, "But I like it—I like it!"

The girl laughed, but with a certain constraint, so it seemed to him.

"Come, now," she said, "if I must help you, let me see your list of proposed victims!"

"Do you know Dr. Pennington, the rector of St. Boniface's, in Philadelphia?" he began. "Well, he has two daughters—nice girls, both of them—"

"Which one do you want?" asked the girl. "The tall one who squints or the fat one with red hair?"

"Come, now," he returned, "she doesn't really squint, you know."

"Call it a cast in her eye if you like; I don't mind. It isn't anything to me," she asserted. "Is it the tall one you want?"

"I don't care," he answered.

"You don't care?" she repeated.

"No," he returned; "that's why I've come to you. I don't care. Which one do you recommend?"

"I don't recommend either of them!" she responded, promptly. "I shouldn't be a true friend if I let you throw yourself away on one of those frights!"

"I'll give them up if you say so," said he; "but I've always heard that they are good, quiet girls—domesticated, you know—and—"

"Who is next?" she pursued, with a return of her arbitrary manner.

"Well," he suggested, bashfully, "I haven't any reason to suppose she would look at me, and it sounds so conceited in me to suggest that such a handsome woman—and so rich, too—would listen to me, but—"

"Who is this paragon?" his companion demanded.

"Didn't I mention her name?" he responded. "I thought I had. We passed her only a little while ago—Mrs. Poole."

"Mrs. Poole?" the girl replied. "That was the sickly looking creature in black lolling back in a victoria, wasn't it?"

"She isn't sickly, really," he retorted; "but I don't think mourning is becoming to her. Of course, if we are married she will wear colors and—"

"I didn't think you were willing to take up with a widow!" she interrupted, with a slight touch of acerbity. "I thought it was a girl for whom you were seeking!"

"It was a wife of some sort," he replied. "I don't know myself what would suit me best. That's why

I am consulting you. I'm going to rely on your judgment—”

“But you mustn't do that!” she cried.

“It is just what I've got to do!” he insisted. “And if you think it would be a mistake for me to marry a widow, why—it's for you to say.”

“I must say that I think it would be a great mistake for a doctor to marry a woman who looks as if she couldn't live through the week,” he responded. “I should suppose it would ruin any physician's practice to have a wife as woe-begone as that Mrs. Poole! Of course, I don't know her, and I've nothing to say against her, and she may be as beautiful and as charming as you say she is.”

“I give her up at once!” he declared, laughing. “She shall never even know how near she came to having a chance to reject me.”

“Is that all?” the girl asked, a little spitefully. “Have you anybody else on your list?”

“I have only just one more,” he replied.

“Who is she?” was the girl's quick question.

“I'm not sure that you have met her,” he returned. “She's from the South or Southwest, I don't know—”

“What's her name?” was the impatient query.

“Chubb,” he answered. “It's not a pretty name, is it? But that doesn't matter if I'm to persuade her to change it.”

“Chubb?” the girl repeated, as though trying to recall the name. “Chubb? Not Virgie Chubb?”

“Her name is Virginia,” he admitted.

The girl by his side laughed a little shrilly. “Virgie Chubb?” she cried. “That scrawny thing?”

The Doctor confessed that Miss Chubb was not exactly plump.

“Not plump? I should think not, indeed,” the girl declared. “Do you know what Miss Marlenspuyk said about her? She said that Virgie Chubb looked like a death's-head on a toothpick! That's what she said.”

They were approaching the Mall, and the Doctor knew that his time was now very brief. They had to slow up just then, as a policeman was conveying across the broad road three or four nurses with a baby-carriage or two, and then they had to steer clear of half a dozen working-men going home across the Park, with pipes in their mouths and dinner-pails swinging in their hands.

"So you don't think Miss Chubb would be a good wife for me?" he inquired.

"I have nothing to say at all! It isn't really any of my business!" she replied. "It is simply absurd of you to ask me!"

"But you must help me out," he urged. "So far you have only told me that I mustn't marry any of the girls I had on my list."

"I don't want to see you throw yourself away," she returned. "A pretty kind of a friend I should be if I encouraged you to marry your Virgie Chubb and your Widow Poole!"

"That's it, precisely," he asserted; "that's why I've come to you. Of course, I don't want to throw myself away. Your advice has been invaluable to me. But so far you have only shown me how it is that none of these girls will suit. That brings me no nearer my object. I've simply got to have a wife."

"I don't see why you need be in such a hurry," she replied.

"I must, I must!" he retorted. "And there's one more girl I haven't mentioned so far—"

"You've kept her to the last!" she snapped.

"Yes, I've kept her to the last, because I haven't any right even to hope that she would have me. She is not a widow, and she hasn't a cast in her eye, and she is neither fat nor scrawny; she is just a lovely young girl—"

"You speak of her with more enthusiasm than you did of any of others," she broke in. "Do I know her?"

"You ought to know her," he answered; "but I doubt if you think as well of her as I do."

"Who is she?" was her swift question.

"You won't be offended?"

"Of course not! How absurd! Why should I be offended?" she responded. "Who is she? Who is she?"

The Doctor answered seriously, and with a quaver of emotion in his voice, "She is the girl I have loved for a long time, and her name is Minnie Contoit!"

The girl did not say anything. Her face was as pale as ever, but there was a light in the depths of her cool gray eyes.

"Listen to me once more, Minnie!" implored the young fellow by her side. "You say that none of these other girls will suit me, and I knew that before you said it. I knew that you were the only girl I ever wanted. You promised me your friendship the last time we talked this over, and now I've a chance to tell you how much I need a wife I have hoped you would look at the matter in a clearer light."

She said nothing. He gave her a hasty glance backward and he saw that her father and her grandfather were only a hundred yards or so behind them. The reddening sunset on their right cast lengthening shadows across the road. The spring day was drawing to an end, and the hour had come when he was to learn his fate forever.

"Minnie," he urged once more, "don't you think it is your duty—as a friend, you know—to give me the wife I ought to have?"

She looked at him, and laughed nervously, and then dropped her eyes.

"Oh, well," she said at last, "if I must!"